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HELLO, MYSTERY, PLEASED TO MEET YOU

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The following story is an excerpt from a collection for a book I'm working on called Medicine and the Soul. This, and other selections that I'll share in future newsletters, follow my own journey of consciousness and how working with medical patients who've had out-of-body and near-death experiences has shaped my own path. I am grateful to the patients I've been privileged to work with and the stories they've entrusted to me for the benefit of a wider audience. While some details may have been altered to protect personal identities, the core of the story has been relayed as it happened.

Physicians who say there's no evidence in medicine of something beyond this existence aren't looking and scientists who explain it all away as a firing of the temporal lobe from anoxia, in my opinion, are missing the point. I've seen plenty through the years that I can't explain and honestly, I don't feel a strong need to.

As an observer of things that defy our known physical laws, I'm quite comfortable marveling at the mystery without an insistent need to understand the how of it all or deny it happened just because I can't fit it neatly into a rational formula. Actually, I find the mystery lovely and can honor it as something that happens with or without my belief in it.

The fact that we can't explain everything with science doesn't mean we have to. As some wise person once said, the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, and I'm okay with that. I will say, however, that what I have witnessed during my years in medicine has strengthened my suspicions that there is more to us than mortar and bricks, or flesh and bones as it were.

One of my most memorable encounters with "the mystery" happened when I was an internal medicine resident doing a required oncology rotation. The cancer ward also served as an inpatient hospice and we took call for both.

One of the hospice patients on our service was a sixty-three-year-old woman with widely metastatic breast cancer. Her body was wracked with pain and it took generous doses of morphine and several nurses to be able to move her for daily cares without causing considerable discomfort. As her condition deteriorated and her cachectic frame continued to wither away, she became so weak she could not move of her own accord.

Earlier in the week there had been a family meeting that resulted in a shift in her treatment goals toward palliative care. There would be no more chemotherapy, no more radiation. In keeping with the patient's wishes she was placed on a low-dose morphine drip to make her comfortable until she passed, and for the next few days family members and friends drifted in and out to pay their respects and hold vigil.

One evening when I had the overnight duty, I was on my way to chat with the nurses at their station and catch up on some of my routine work that I'd accumulated throughout the day. As I passed the patient's open door, I noticed a daughter that I recognized from the family meeting sitting at her mother's bedside.

I leaned into the room to ask how things were going and we struck up a conversation. She seemed in a mood to talk, so with nothing much else happening on the ward, I pulled up a chair in the room's dim light and began chatting quietly with the daughter. It was easy conversation and seemed to be a comfort to her, so we visited.

We must have been sitting there for nearly half an hour, talking about nothing in particular, when we began to hear murmuring coming from the patient's direction. Turning our attention to her, we noticed that she appeared to be having a conversation. This seemed odd to both of us because she'd not been responsive at all for the past two days and even before that had not done much more than utter moans or random, single words. Her body hadn't moved in over a week, except for the routine repositioning by the staff to avoid bed sores, but now she began to add subtle hand movements as one would in the course of normal conversation. And it seemed absolutely conversational, complete with pauses and subtle head gestures suggesting that she was listening when she wasn't talking.

The daughter and I fell into silence watching her, leaning in to try to make out what she was saying. But despite the conversational cadence it was only distinguishable as mumbles. This went on for about ten minutes then she opened her eyes for the first time in days and seemed to focus intently on something in middle space. Her daughter tried to speak with her but there was no recognition or acknowledgement as the patient's eyes looked past her and up toward the corner of the room.

Momentarily, her attention shifted to an area of the ceiling above her requiring her to turn her head from where she had lain for the past few hours on her right side. Her daughter moved forward in fascination to observe her mother but said nothing.

After staring into the area above her bed for what seemed like several minutes, she began to make movements attempting to sit up. Her daughter looked at me and we both exchanged glances of amazement at what we were seeing, and it seemed understood that we were witnessing something quite out of the ordinary.

The woman had not moved for days and certainly not without complete help or immense pain, but now she was moving with relative ease and gave no indication of any discomfort whatsoever. She seemed to be engaged in a process that clearly did not involve us, so we simply watched in awe and let it unfold.

Then in one deft movement she pushed herself up to a near-sitting position, leaned forward and lifted her hand up as if reaching for something. She then said very clearly and with obvious surprise, "You're here!"

I heard her daughter begin to softly cry and I sat back with an intention of just holding space for whatever was happening that neither of us could explain. The patient maintained this position for probably thirty seconds or so then, as if being lowered by unseen hands, slowly laid back down on the pillow and with eyes closed exhaled deeply her last breath and died.

We sat in silence for a long time, neither of us knowing what to say but clearly aware that something quite mysterious and wonderful had just taken place. Finally, with tears streaming down her face and her voice trembling she said, "I'm so grateful I was here to witness that." I was too.

I think that was the moment that I fell in love with "the mystery" and have since had many occasions to marvel at things I, nor anyone else, can adequately explain. I've also had as many opportunities to observe colleagues being dismissive of things that don't fit neatly into their frame of reference, which seems to be a human default when things just don't make sense. Unable to explain when context fails them, it seems more comfortable to see it as "not there". Or in the absence of a physically logical explanation, it is reasoned away as a neurological phenomenon or a second wind a patient captures after adequate rest or appropriate pain control.

It can be enough just to enjoy the mystery and allow yourself to experience something with reverent awe without a need to fully understand. Being able to simply greet mystery without demanding that it explain itself often invites more. Just as with any friend, a gracious welcome more often than not will open the door for more frequent visits.

Post Script: Now for an extra bit of intrigue specifically for my TMI family. Fifteen years after the encounter described above, I attended a Lifeline program at The Monroe Institute. As many of you know, the Lifeline program is specific to soul rescue at many Focus levels, primarily levels 23 through 26.

During our progression throughout the week I continually found myself being detained in Focus 22, a place where souls are supposedly “in between”, still in the physical but poised to exit into the nonphysical – such as coma or suppression of consciousness with drugs.

On one occasion I found myself slogging with some difficulty through gray, jelly-like stalactite formations that seemed to contain subtle movement and knew instinctively that I was in Focus 22. I was moving through it with some resistance, straining a bit to move on to Focus 23 where I thought the real work would begin.

As I perceived myself starting to clear Focus 22 and move into Focus 23, quicker than an instant, a hand followed by a head and a torso of a very thin, cachectic woman reached out from one of the formations and said, “You’re here!”. Without even thinking about it I took her hand and beyond our own volition were off and moving quickly to Focus 27 where she was instantly released from my grasp. Something about that encounter seemed familiar, but I didn’t have the spine-tingling moment until I was reading my journal to compose this story and read what my patient from 15 years before had said and done. She had reached out her hand followed by her head and torso and said, “You’re here!”, then her body reclined as she took her last breath and died.